

# Practitioner Research and Professional Development in Education

## 4 Identifying an Area for Research

Contributors: Anne Campbell & Olwen McNamara & Peter Gilroy  
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[p. 49 ↓ ]

## 4 Identifying an Area for Research

### OVERVIEW

This chapter is based on a discussion held by the authors of the book as they attempted to discover a topic they could research. The discussion is structured around the key themes that are a part of any attempt to identify a research topic.

### Introduction

Three people came together for a recorded 60-minute discussion to identify a research topic. We present edited selections from the transcript that was produced to illustrate the way in which even experienced researchers have to cover similar issues to those which you will have to address. In passing it is worth noting that if you are thinking of tape recording interviews and then transcribing them, the complete transcription of this 60-minute discussion took just over five hours, an allocation of your time that you will have to think carefully about if you decide on transcribing a complete interview.

### The first moves

To begin with you will need to *identify a research topic*. If you're lucky you will already have something very clearly in mind, but if not then you will need to play around with ideas and establish quite what it is you want to research. In what follows you will see Anne obviously had something she wanted to research and, through a process of discussion, that something becomes clearer.

[p. 50 ↓ ]

## Illustration: identifying a research topic

Anne (A): If I start the ball rolling, I've been thinking about the way in which professional development can take place within school and the way in which colleagues can be helped to put together their professional development portfolios. This could be almost like kite-marking their professional development in a relationship with a higher education institution. I suppose I'm thinking about something similar to Investors in People – the school seen as a professional development school that has undergone a process to provide quality professional development for its members of staff. So, I'd be looking at something that helped to research ways that a school might do that, with a school's professional development programme running alongside the more formal certification and might feed into it if a teacher wanted to.

Olwen (O): So you're talking of something that is driven by higher education (HE)?

A: No. The school is – well yes, HE would have a role in first of all identifying what was going on and then helping the schools to document it. And if you're talking about quality then you have to talk about learning outcomes, and you have to talk about structures and processes for managing these outcomes within the school. I suppose I'm talking of it as higher education having quite a big stake in it but the schools themselves operating the process with some kind of annual quality assurance mechanism.

Peter (P): But we seem to be moving well beyond a small and manageable cluster of schools. Instead of, presumably a couple of primary schools and a secondary school, and maybe a HE institution, the way you're talking, Anne, it is a much, much bigger project than that.

A: Yes, I was thinking that perhaps several groups of schools, whether just contained within the North-West, or whether you try to get some friendly groups in other parts of the country – because if you're going to make an impact on policy you need large numbers of research sites. Maybe we want to do something much smaller, but I would've thought that even if you could have a group one side of the North-West, and another group another side of the North-West and perhaps a third group somewhere else completely different, it would add to the project. I think the issues, say, in the rural

schools for instance [p. 51 ↓ ] are going to be different than those in city schools. I was thinking maybe two, three, four clusters.

O: But that's a very much the 'done to' model, and really that's against the modern idiom isn't it? Its all about ownership and not being alienated from the decision making progress when it comes to managing your own, or your school's, CPD portfolio.

A: But there is an interest I know because I've talked to you about the network learning community I'm working with – ten schools – and they are very interested in this. They want help because they don't think they can do this themselves, but what they also want is the quality assurance, or the kite mark, from a local university. This is the scale of things beginning to get bigger. These schools are talking about not just teaching staff, but of course teaching assistants, and anybody that works in the school actually accrediting their professional development. They're saying really that there's more crying need for teaching assistants because they're already training them in schools themselves, and no there's no recognition of this. But of course you're talking there at National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level rather than at degree level. That's something else that I was thinking about, looking at talking to open college federations of FE because I don't think unis are involved with NVQ's.

At this point you can see that not only are there problems with identifying a topic but also inevitably there are problems regarding the scale of the research topic, which has grown from examining CPD practices of teachers in a very limited number of schools to include all staff in schools in at least three widely differing locations. It is a common problem with a research topic that, fired by the interest and excitement of a good idea, you can find yourself going well beyond what you can manage without being part of a large research team.

What now happens is the initial idea leads on to another which attempts to reduce the *scale of the proposal*, which is then discussed further.

[p. 52 ↓ ]

## Illustration: the scale of the proposal

P: That idea though of distinguishing between having your CPD done to you and instead taking ownership of it suggests to me that maybe part of what you're suggesting requires the creation of teacher researchers, who could be trained up by their HE institution. They could be the CPD specialists – if you like – within the schools who would actually be both a school teacher and in some sense linked to the university. You could actually reduce the amounts of work that you would have to do by just training up these people as researchers, researchers for the project, so the project would actually be very much a ‘teacher-led but managed by us’ kind of project.

A: I've got to say that what was in my mind was working with people who already have experience in a research role or professional development role in schools. The idea of partnership, I think is a good one and extending the ITT partnership into CPD and research because that's how I see it going. Many ITE partnerships are much more HE-led, that's true, but still there's still a lot of activity from schools.

P: Yes, so what's started out as a possible large scale funded project has now become something we could manage without any funding really, except our time. I suppose time is a resource; it has to be counted as money. So how big is it going to go before it becomes unmanageable by us?

A: What you could do is a very quick pilot project that could then enable you to write an informed bid based on data, some ideas that you've developed. So let's concentrate on no more than two clusters over a short period of time. Our objectives would be to identify CPD needs within those clusters and what possibilities could be for trying out new ideas to connect school-based CPD to HE CPD.

A basic question for any project is what its scale should be and this is one that you will have to address from the outset. As you can see from the discussion, the original very large-scale project has now come to be something much more manageable.

The next problem to deal with is one of *time*.

[p. 53 ↓ ]

## Illustration: time

P: If we just look at the pilot for a moment. The timing is quite critical because of the school timetable. We're now in February. We couldn't set this up for March because of Easter. But if we go into the summer, we interfere with exams in secondary schools and also SATS in primary, so that means that we couldn't do the pilot until September? Is that right?

A: I think so. Certainly we couldn't do it at the beginning of September. It would have to be at the end of September because people, including ourselves(!) have got to get into classes and get settled, but it does give you some planning time.

O: Yes I was going to say planning would take at least that long.

A: It does give you time to do a bit of a literature review, and to do some drafts of what it might look like, and talk to schools about it. So even though officially the pilot wouldn't start until much later, we would be talking to schools and doing things on the ground before then.

P: Yes. So staying with that timeline that, as you say, gives you plenty of planning time, we could presumably pull in the appropriate teachers to join the planning team for the pilot.

A: Yes, so it's a year from now that we'd actually work through to the larger project.

Sorting out a *timeline* (that is, a structure for the project, beginning with the first meeting and ending with the report, dissertation or whatever) is obviously important. Perhaps even more important is making it a realistic one so that it can be kept to.

A *literature search* has been mentioned in passing, but now some problems that such reviews have are discussed.

[p. 54 ↓ ]

## Illustration: literature search

P: Can I ask you a question, which is you mentioned doing a literature review. Would this be more than just library work? If so how would you carry that out? How would you actually look for research projects and so on that might be relevant to the research, that you know are running somewhere if you didn't happen to know that they were running?

A: Well, one of the ways of doing that is to look at conference proceedings because often conferences are where people present important projects in progress. So for instance the British Education Research Association papers, are online – you go there and have a quick look though to see what there was and you would come up with quite a number from last year's conference and if you do that internationally, you would perhaps be able to pick up quite a few other ones.

O: If you look at the DfES website to see what projects have been funded recently, you can see which ones are relevant and I suppose you could do that with the professional associations too.

P: The quick way into those associations is through the UCET website because they have links to other teacher education, or education-type research websites as well as DFES, TTA, GTC and so on. The UCET website is just '<http://www.ucet.ac.uk>'.

O: But I think you've hit on an incredibly big problem for us let alone school teachers. There is just too much information.

P: I think that's why I paused there because ten years ago, even less, you'd think of researchers as going to the library, finding the most recent journal, looking at the biographies for the areas that you're interested in, and then following these up so you get the key references that are being used in relevant publications. That wouldn't work now, except as a very crude beginning.

A: I think as well, because people usually are involved in some kind of network or other, maybe it's not the partnership network, it might be through national scholarship, or school leadership – you have a range of people that you can actually talk to and find



out what's going on and get contacts, people to ring or websites to look at, or whatever, because [p. 55 ↓ ] there are a lot of projects around and there are a lot of them that are producing newsletters, things like that, which are often on the web as well so it's spending time doing that and finding out.

P: So literature searches could be a virtual search, at least to begin with. You have got to find the key websites to go to get yourself off the ground. My last book I co-authored with Anne Edwards and David Hartley – they bring a psychological set of networks and a sociological set respectively to my philosophical ones and they had references which were directly relevant to my work, which I would never otherwise have identified because they had the kind of subject specialist background that they did. I guess if we were to work together, we might find the same, but not necessarily the same subjects but the networks that we constantly refer to, to formulate our ideas.

A: But increasingly, well especially with this particular idea about both, investigating, identifying and if you like accrediting school-based professional development, there's very little written about it. Generally speaking the professional development has been linked to something like being a teacher researcher, or it's been within a project or going on a master's course, or being part of some kind of initiative like the Literacy Strategy and Numeracy Strategy, which is concentrated on the content and the input, whereas what we're looking at here is teachers working together, teachers, if you like, coaching each other, teachers providing their own professional development or others with colleagues. This sort of topic is more under-researched than many other topics that you might want to look at, so we might have trouble finding appropriate literature.

O: I like the idea of a more collaborative emphasis, because the processes I think are still as important whether you're a lone researcher or whether you're a member of an action group or member of a staff group. Take for instance the network learning community that I'm working with at the moment – this is about raising achievement at the transition from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2, so they're concentrating a lot of their activity around that, in particular, new approaches to literacy development using media, film, digital film, all sorts of things, in trying to ... [reach] the reluctant readers and writers. So right across 10 schools, you've got people collaborating and within those schools they're identified lead learners which is, I think, the normal thing that they're doing in there, 20 lead learners, two in each school, all of them have different,

if you like, interests, they've all worked around a very broad theme, but all of them have different interests. They tend to work in pairs the two of them in the same school, and you've got there 20 teachers working around 10 themes under a broad raising achievement transition. So it's matching the [p. 56 ↓ ] school improvement agenda, as well as people's interests – because one of them's particularly interested in the use of video, one in particularly making films, story board-type of approach.

P: So we've got a project with a pilot, a rough timeline, we've raised a number of issues about the nature of research itself and what this does to the top down model with one of us at the top and the teacher at the bottom, or maybe the other way round, and there's this problem about the literature search nowadays not being as straightforward as it was. So you're looking for key websites really, as well as a good library.

Having established some of the problems of a literature search on a topic that has very little literature, the discussion then turns to the *questions to identify objectives* that the research will be dealing with.

## Illustration: questions to identify objectives

A: Now I think one of the things we need to do is to really think in a bit more depth what the project would look like, what questions you would be asking, what kind of outcomes are we expecting and how are we going to do it. Because we seem to have a purpose – to provide, if you like, a pilot and an example of accrediting school-based professional development. So that's the kind of general idea isn't it? So what sort of questions do we want to be asking around that general idea? *How* are we going to do it first, rather than *what* questions? We're going to have some cluster groups of schools.

P: Well, we could do it that way. I wonder whether, if you take that idea I mentioned earlier, of having trained researchers implanted within the school, who are themselves schoolteachers – I mean, they're there already – what you would have is not so much clusters of schools but a group of schools that had people like us in them. Or at least people with the same thoughts that we have. It's rather like getting inexpensive research associates. One of the benefits for the people involved, bearing in mind you wouldn't expect them to have a career as professional researchers, is that the work would be

part of their professional development. So it would be an example of professional development [p. 57 ↓ ] for them and of course for ourselves. But as you say, what we need are a set of objectives or problems that the project is supposed to address. Perhaps the first one is: what currently exists in the form of CPD?

A: And that's, I think, a really interesting one because if we look at what we found out from the sections of the CPD project and if I cast my mind back to 10 years ago, working with teachers, one of the biggest problems is identifying what professional development *is*. And also there is so much going on out there – do you want to accredit everything, or is there a sense of teachers deciding to select what to focus on in any one year, which links it very much to what's going on in each of the individual schools? So, yes, mapping the area, finding out what's going on and identifying what is termed 'professional development is your first step.'

O: And also more than that really in the political context that we're in, a national context, you've got to think of what is the current DfES model of professional development? Because that's a big issue, particularly since most of the teachers – three quarters of the teachers – have a very traditional perception of CPD and yet I think the government perception of CPD has moved right to the far end of it into peer coaching, lesson observation.

P: Teachers could appear to be trapped in their profession and so we could work through a model where you first become a teacher, then work through some form of CPD, which'll allow you if necessary to move out of school teaching onto some other form of teaching. But now, the model that the TTA has of advanced teachers, SEN specialists and so on, are always in the school, there's little or no movement out of the school possible. The different funding regimes in universities as well makes it even more difficult to move out financially. So we've got a kind of CPD, which is narrowing the horizons rather than broadening them, and our project might be seen as trying to reverse that view.

A: There is also a feeling from government that every teacher should be involved in professional development of some sort. There is that feeling that CPD is not quite an entitlement and not quite a requirement. Whereas it was much more common 15 years ago for some people to say, 'Well I'm not interested in CPD, I'm getting on with my job'.

And I suppose it was an understandable view, because there was a lack of recognition as to what was going on in terms of development in schools anyway.

O: And now the national initiatives have a CPD done *to* you, feel such as the national numeracy strategies of literacy, science Key Stage 3 strategy, and so on.

[p. 58 ↓ ]

P: Yes, and TTA inset although it provides funding for CPD, you don't have any choice about it, you have to draw from a range of courses that are identified for you by the TTA.

O: What it's also doing coming back to your point, that a classroom focus doesn't allow you to look back at the ideology of the situation you are in, keeping you technically focused on what's going on. So having problems in the classroom doesn't allow you to question the literacy strategy, for example, that might be causing some of those problems.

P: It's interesting that because what you're describing is a form of centrist, TTA centrist CPD which first of all restricts the skills that you have and secondly prevents you being critical, so that CPD becomes a form of retention, a policy for retention, so it helps resolve one of the problems the TTA were having of retaining teachers professionally. This is very much a live issue. I think it's well worth following through.

A: It also raises for me the issue that teachers who are not involved in any sort of CPD activities, and the whole business of the assessment of prior experiential learning, which is something which happens anyway, in the majority of certificated courses. What I had been envisaging for a project like the one we're talking about, would ease and help people to identify more the experiential learning that takes part in the workplace. And therefore if they wanted to, it would also facilitate bringing that forward as evidence for certificated learning. It actually just accredits it and recognises it, and in that way charts a lot more what is actually happening on the ground of professional development, more so than what's happening at the moment. I do think one of the things that might be quite useful for us to do is to think about what we actually know about what's happening out there and to help us formulate questions. Because when I was thinking about

this earlier, that having someone who is responsible for managing and organising professional development in this school is a good idea – many secondary schools already do have somebody, usually in the senior management team, but I can't say that that's true for primary schools. So my idea was that they would be the personnel we'd want to target first in this kind of project, as well as the head teacher, or somebody in the senior management team. So that immediately, as soon as you start approaching schools who want to be involved or could be involved, you go straight to the senior management team. The other implication is that it has to be a whole school thing, so therefore you have to concern yourselves with the management of the school. But the person who manages CPD, and the knowledge, and information that they need is key to what happens in the school. So that's where I [p. 59 ↓ ] would probably want to start by thinking about that person and how we could get them on board.

P: Yes. That would fit nicely with the pilot as well, wouldn't it? You could start to see whether that was possible with the pilot. So we've got a beginning of a structure, a kind of pre-history of CPD, immediate history of CPD, and then what exists now, so you contextualise the situation now, using history. We can do that from our own experience and publications. So that is quite straightforward, that section, rather like a standard dissertation – at least the first two bits – contextualising via a standard literature review. We might then need an interview or two with someone from the DFES or someone like Mary Russell or from the CPD committee at UCET, but we'd tidy that up quite quickly. That would then start to throw up questions, wouldn't it, that's what a good contextualising section does. As we've been doing today, you start to veer off in other directions, and get pulled back to the topic that you're supposed to be working on.

A: And there is a problem about evidence of prior learning, even when you consider a reflective journal, because if you look at things like performance management, and you look at what pupils do in terms of records of achievement I mean they're basically not worth the paper they're written on, people don't look at them, do they? You go for an interview and its like, oh yes, you've got a record of achievement. I think there's too much emphasis on written evidence anyway, and I wouldn't want to be going down the road of increasing teachers' workload by asking them to do even more. So we'd have to be thinking about what is worthy of credit and how you measure it.

P: It'd be interesting if we had as part of our team these small group of teachers who were these teacher researchers for the project, because we could ask them that question. What would they consider to be worthy of credit? Because they'll have degrees, some of them might have master's degrees. In fact by being part of the team they could join immediately the master's programme if they hadn't already got a master's degree, a master's by research. So perhaps we should be running concurrently with the project a master's research programme, just on research.

[p. 60 ↓ ]

So it looks as if we've got the rough idea for a project fairly well planned out, the skeleton of it, and a clear topic. We're also saying we can't identify the key questions until we've done the contextualisation. We still need obviously to work out a more detailed timescale for the research.

So here you see that the further development of a research topic needs to be informed by the literature search, which provides a context within which it has meaning and a purpose. At this point in the discussion the three contributors then asked themselves how they came to identify a particular project they eventually worked up. What is interesting here is the way in which the examples given came from actual teaching situations which sparked an interest in taking the problems and puzzles that were thrown up further.

## Individual ways of approaching research

### Illustration: approaching research

P: What we've just looked at is a group of three of us looking at a project, which is going to be quite large scale, and requires funding, and preparation that goes with it. How about examining examples of our own research interests? I could draw on one that I had a while ago. There was a time when I got very very interested in IT, and its use in primary schools. And it came about because I was in primary schools watching

people working, and I couldn't understand why they weren't using IT for the particular work they were doing. They were trying to design a newsletter for parents, but written by the children, semi-edited by the teacher concerned, but they were doing the whole thing manually. It struck me as bizarre because there were PCs along the corridor and they were just not using them. So I was faced with an issue there, why are they not using the equipment they could be using to do what they were doing? And that led me into talking with the teachers involved, and the children. The older children were also somewhat puzzled because they had IT at home. This led me to begin to write up this issue of what was happening to the IT policy that the then Conservative government was pushing in to the schools, to see what was going on. So I was looking at one school in my immediate area, which happened to have one of my children in as well. It was a highly personal situation, but it was possible to generate at least one research paper out of that. Now that's how I did it, it came out of a very personal interest, and also bumping up against the particular problem in a school. So how would you deal with a particular and personal research issue?

[p. 61 ↓ ]

A: Well, I've done very little research totally by myself, but when I think about what I have done, it's been mainly practitioner-orientated because that's what drives me, as a researcher. So research either for a research degree or in terms of improving my own practice, and looking at how I worked with people, is how I would approach it, and that would probably be through some kind of reflective diary to start with, to try and get some ideas down on paper, and then actually monitoring and researching those ideas over a short period of time to try and look at how I would improve my practice.

One of the other things I've been doing recently which is slightly different, because I've been involved with quite a lot of empirically based research projects, is to use some of my experiences in that, to write a more conceptual piece about more ideas or policy rather than collecting data and researching in that particular way, which I've got to say I do find quite difficult! Recently I've just written a couple of pieces like that, and in a way, my inaugural lecture was kind of working towards that, it was based on projects that I'd done but I wasn't particularly reporting them. The lecture allowed me to do a little bit of reporting on data that had been collected. But really developing ideas, and particularly ideas about professional development, and in some ways I find that quite interesting to

do, and I can do that by myself. And it involves quite a bit of re-doing, obviously, a lot of discussion, and a lot of reflective thinking, looking back, trying to make sense of what's happened in the past. So that's how I can try to approach it.

O: I haven't been involved in any personal research of this nature at all. As it happens all my research has been driven by funding, albeit I've become very interested in it afterwards, but it's been a very eclectic bunch and it's just been based really on what turns up and what liaisons I make. But a huge amount of it has been based on networks with the local authority advisers etc., and working with people and mainly it's been researching development projects. So really it's been almost exclusively looking at baseline research to see classically what the situation is now with a notion of implementing a new policy and then evaluating the new developments, whatever they are.

By and large it's always been with networks of schools and specifically with the teacher researchers in each network of schools, so I think about at least four if not five projects I've done have been based on that kind of model, which has thrown up issues of ownership which has always been a very key area that I'm very aware of.

A: What about your doctoral study though?

[p. 62 ↓ ]

O: Yes, in fact I was thinking when you were talking about that – well I wouldn't call it philosophical in Peter's presence! But it was kind of deeply theoretical and literature based. Bits of it were empirically based and that was videoing my own practice, but I wouldn't lay claim to it being research. I wouldn't lay claim to doing any research until after I got my PhD.

## Concluding remarks



## Illustration: coming to a conclusion

A: In a way, partly what we're doing in the book is providing just that for practitioners. It's the basis of what we as experienced people working with teachers think that teachers need, in terms of research training, and ideas for doing research either alone or with groups.

P: It's interesting how very different that is because what we've just been talking about [individual research projects] doesn't require money, it just requires our time, so it requires manipulating your time if you were a school teacher again in the school to give yourself the freedom to do the PhD or whatever. I mean in my case, I actually took time out of school as a full-time teacher to get a master's degree, and became a supply teacher, so that I could control the amount of time I was working and the amount of time I was doing my master's degree. But that's only possible if you haven't got a family, and a house, and all the other responsibilities we tend to collect. Research does require a resource, time. With the large project what you're looking at is capital to allow you to do the project, in an individual project you're looking at time, which is the capital, to allow you to do whatever the project is. So it's the same principle, it's just on a different scale.

A: But we're different from teachers in school because (a) we're more experienced and doing research and (b) because in some ways it's a requirement of our job, to actually undertake some research, and we feel we've got something we want to say, and we want to make it public, whereas I think that some teachers find that aspect of it difficult because they've not been in a community, they've not been in an environment that actually supports such thinking. Teachers might talk about their practice, but it's difficult actually to talk about how you research it, or to say, 'Well I've been doing this, I've been investigating [p. 63 ↓ ] my practice and I think it might be quite useful if I talk to you about this'. So what's important is providing that kind of environment for teachers to grow in. Some schools have it, but it's giving teachers the confidence as well to be able to talk, and not just in a bland way, but actually to give detail in depth and rigour to the kind of work that's going on in the classrooms, and they don't always see the need to do it.

O: And we've also got to see what's driving a teacher to consider carrying out research. Let's face it where the money is for teachers is in things like advanced skills teachers whose salary can go up to £40,000. Now, what kind of CPD experiences would necessarily fit them for a kind of position like that because we're thinking of us wanting master's/PhD's? I can't begin to imagine that it's a PhD that would maybe get them along that route.

A: But I think there is a case for advanced skills teachers undertaking research themselves, and undertaking quite a bit of professional development, because they are in that kind of mentoring role with other teachers, and demonstrating a modelling role. So in some ways there're a number of things in terms of the subject knowledge in whatever area they're working in, that they do need to be in the forefront of, as well as the kind of skills needed to be working alongside somebody.

O: Mentoring I think is a key thing to a lot of the models of CPD that are around at the moment.

A: But you see this is where you need a community to debate things, especially while the pressure is on schools to conform to whatever strategy you've got to work with now, or whatever the flavour of the month is. It's interesting to watch emotional intelligence and accelerated learning and what have you, take over from literacy, because the nature of that is much more exploratory, at least you think it would be, but yet it's been presented as a package called 'emotional intelligence', a package called 'accelerated learning'. I think that's what teachers as researchers should be doing, making problematic and criticising the packages rather than accepting them. And I think there are people who are trying to do that, you just need to give them a voice.

P: I think that distinction (between the touchy-feely approach and everything's working fine approach, and the highly critical approach) is what we're trying to capture in the book aren't we? We're arguing that there's no point in the former, it's the latter which identifies a good researcher, finding appropriately critical evidence to substantiate whatever judgements you're making.

[p. 64 ↓ ]

A: But often it's difficult to do that on your own. Even people like ourselves, professional researchers, don't always find the time to talk about an issue with other people. Do we always have colleagues asking questions making you rethink what you've been thinking? Like teachers we always ask, 'Is there time? Is there time to do it?'

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